

## (Good) Work after September 11

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It's become a cliché to remark that "Everything has changed after September 11." When it comes to Americans' understanding of political and religious forces in the world, our feelings of vulnerability, our decisions about travel and holidays, this remark may well be true. But most adults in our society spend about half of our waking hours at work—and some a good deal more! It is worth asking "Have our lives at work changed since September 11"?

Since 1995 my colleagues Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, William Damon, and I and our associates have been engaged in a large-scale study of work in various professions. We have focused on what we term "good work"-- work that is at once expert in quality and socially responsible. We probe to what extent individuals who desire to carry out good work succeed or fail at doing so during a time when market forces have been overwhelmingly powerful, there are few potent counterforces, and vast changes are being wrought by technology. As I consider our findings in light of the events of the last three months, I detect changes in three areas: the significance of various professions; the work preferences of individuals, particularly the young; and the ways in which individuals gain satisfaction from their work.

The first two professions that we studied were journalism and genetics. We selected these professions because arguably they deal with the two most important forms of information for human beings. Journalists tell us what is happening in the world: they provide the "memes", the units of meaning that we absorb and convey to others. Geneticists study our genes, the units that determine the physical states of our bodies and our minds. For the first time in history, geneticists are in a position to change our genetic makeup through therapeutic interventions. In 1997-1999 we conducted in-depth interviews with over 100 leading journalists and 100 leading geneticists. We reported our findings in the recently published Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet.

Journalism and genetics turned out to be widely divergent professions, far more so than we had expected. As a group, geneticists are delighted with their choice of profession. They can't wait to get up in the morning; they receive enormous "flow", as well as significant financial rewards, for their daily efforts. Journalists, for the most part, are frustrated by their work. They entered the profession with ideals, hoping to cover stories fairly and completely, investigate wrongdoing, bring scrutiny to the powerful and solace to the powerless. Yet they feel buffeted by forces that they cannot control. Most news outlets are owned by multinational corporations that care primarily about the bottom line; news as a whole seems less interesting to readers and viewers, and their appetites seem restricted to scandalous or frivolous topics.

In the terms of our analysis, genetics emerges as a profession that is well-aligned. That is, all of the relevant stakeholders want the same thing from genetics--longer and healthier

lives. In contrast, journalism has become poorly aligned. What the professionals want is at odds with the financial interests of the owners and the banal interests of the audience. Few if any geneticists, but quite a few journalists, would like to leave the profession.

Being in a well-aligned profession does not ensure good work, but it helps. Where there is consensus about the nature of work in a domain, practitioners can go about their business in the way that they feel is right. When, however, the profession is pulled in opposite directions, good work proves elusive. Take the dedicated foreign correspondent who, before September 11, wanted to cover ethnic conflicts in Afghanistan. It would have been difficult to gain permission to cover this story from the editor or publisher, because the coverage would be expensive and readers or viewers would have displayed little interest in what was found. Journalists who want to do good work would either have to convince resistant supervisors, work for an obscure nonprofit outlet that focuses on foreign news, or seek another profession altogether.

While our initial research focussed on "genes" and "memes", we have also been studying several other professions, including law, medicine, theater, philanthropy, and higher education. Of course, conditions, values, and opportunities vary across these realms. With respect to philanthropy, one may wonder whether any problems arise when one is in a position to dole out money; with respect to theater, one may wonder why anyone would pursue a career where it is so difficult to make a living. Yet, across professions, market forces have become increasingly dominant. Nearly all institutions of higher education, for example, are in a perpetual state of fund-raising, and one must ask, even of the best

universities, whether they are mutating from .orgs to .coms. And issues of alignment dog all professions. In medicine, the values of individual practitioners often clash with the dictates of the HMO for which they work; and philanthropists are surprisingly uncertain about whether "their" money is being well-spent and whether it might even cause harm in some cases--for example, pushing organizations in directions that undermine their missions.

With respect to professions, the first thing to note is how quickly conditions can change. During the summer of 2001, the biggest issue in the public consciousness was the sex life of Congressman Gary Condit and the biggest issue on President Bush' radar screen was the legitimacy of stem cell research. Nowadays, Gary Condit has become a footnote, and issues of global conflict dominate the headlines. It would be an exaggeration to state that genetics has become less well aligned. It has simply become less important in the general sphere of things. Fewer dollars are likely to be available for genetics research, and that research is likely to be pulled in directions that are either relevant to our current concern with bioterrorism or to secure scarce dollars from the private sector. Indeed, commenting on the recent announcement of cloning of human embryos, Harold Varmus, the distinguished head of the National Institutes of Health during the Clinton Years, claimed that the chief motive of the announcement was to secure venture capital for Advanced Cell Technologies.

By many indices, journalism --print, broadcast, and photo-- has received a much needed shot in the arm in the last few months. Suddenly citizens care about what is happening around the world; they want news coverage that is detailed and accurate. Americans have consumed much more news, and learned a great about Islam, anthrax, the Taliban, Osama

bin Laden, and even the politics and geography of Afghanistan. In my own view, most news outlets have risen to the occasion. While tabloid coverage has not evaporated, there has been a surprising and reassuring resurgence of quality journalism around the country. Indeed, given the indifferent performance of our national investigative agencies, many of us have come to feel that our best reporters know and understand more than do our leading spies.

This improvement in the quantity and quality of news has come at a cost. News coverage is expensive. In decades past, the owners of news outlets-- often leading members of the community--were satisfied with profits in single digits. In recent years, corporate owners have become greedy, seeking profits that are well into double digits. The corporations that own most major news outlets report far reduced profits and even losses during the last few months. By one estimate, 100 million extra dollars have been spent so far, and 500 million dollars in advertising revenues have been lost. Whether the owners will be willing to sustain thinner profit margins remains to be seen. Unless they do so, the recent realignment within journalism may prove a transient phenomenon.

And what of work in the period since September 11? To begin with, those professions that address clear public needs have experienced increased alignment. In addition to journalism, I can single out human services, the military, and, indeed, much of government service. As Bill Clinton noted recently, it has not escaped public attention that the only individuals whose job it was to go up the stairs of the World Trade Center were government employees. It's easier for individuals in these professions to go to work each day and to do good work.

In contrast, professions that are seen as more frivolous or less essential --for example, those that seem involved simply in making money--have taken a hit.

Not only are established members of professions affected by recent events; young people making career choices do so in the light of September 11. On college campuses, far more young persons are considering careers in public service, intelligence and counter-intelligence, teaching (in part because it is more secure); in contrast, the appeal of venture capital, investment banking, advertising, and other Wall Street/Madison Avenue pursuits is muted. Lawyers report a resurgence of interest in public service and public interest law. Who could have anticipated a call for a return of ROTC to many campuses, including Harvard's?

In our study, we determined that prospective good workers must ponder a set of questions that begin with the letter M: 1) Mission-- What am I trying to achieve in my profession? 2) Model-- Who are the individuals in the profession that I most admire and why? 3) Mirror-- When I look at myself in the mirror as worker, am I proud or ashamed of whom I see? Would I want to live in a world composed of workers like me?

What has struck me most in the last three months is the extent to which nearly everyone that I know-- whether they cherish or despise the profession in which they work-- has been pondering such questions. I think of a relative who works for an auction house and wonders whether she could make better use of her talents; a young person who has put off professional training in order to work in the nonprofit sector; a history teacher who have

reworked his curriculum so that he can focus on current events. It would be an exaggeration to state that everything has changed in the world of work since September 11. Yet I believe that the issues surrounding good work have risen to the fore and that is a good thing.

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